

Shaping Student Learning Through School
Culture:
Vision's Vital & Pragmatic Role

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Introduction

School culture, at first glance, can appear to be abstract. Unlike curriculum, instruction, professional development, or school facilities, school culture as a whole usually isn't found all in one document or school artifact. It is not written, printed, and placed in a binder with a beginning, middle, or end. Culture can be spread around a school from the tone of voices heard in the classrooms to the paint on the walls; from the curriculum that is being taught to data reflecting student achievement; from the technology adopted in the classrooms to the type of student learning that goes on in classrooms. As a whole, culture is the sum of many parts of an organization dynamic that can have significant impact on the primary mission of a school: student learning. Improving something as impactful and important, yet allusive, as school culture takes careful study and planning.

This research brief will explore the challenges and best practices for improving school culture starting with the keystone of improving school culture: *vision*. Since the author believes the other areas of improving school culture emanate from vision, the other critical areas of improving culture will be discussed in relation to it. These areas include: collaboration, professional learning communities, and student achievement.

Vision vs. Policy: Friends or Foes of Improving a Collaborative Culture?

One theme that resonated throughout the research of improving culture is creating one that is collaborative in nature. Looking at building a collaborative culture from a systems thinking perspective, the questions that follow are: How do we improve school culture by building it collaboratively? Is it policy, vision, or both that creates collaboration and ultimately improves school culture?

One possible answer can be found in Turning Point's *Transforming Middle Schools* brief that notes "In a collaborative culture, members of the school community work together effectively and are guided to a by a common purpose." The brief goes on to point out that stakeholders share a common vision of what the school should be like and that goals are collaboratively constructed to lead them to the vision. This vision needs a well-defined core ideology consisting of a core purpose including a fundamental set of values and beliefs (Jerald, 2006).

The second possible answer, using a systems thinking perspective, is to create collaboration and thus improve culture through policy originating at the state and federal levels. Schools are currently facing this from state department of educations and the United States Department of Education. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and Title I are examples. The problem with policy as Larry Cuban (1998) writes is, "Their criteria diverge considerably from what policymakers, administrators, and researchers would prize. Practitioners bring moral and service values inherent to teaching that differ from the technical and scientific values that policy elites possess."

In improving school culture, it is important to make the distinction between vision created culture and policy created culture. Figure 1 illustrates this distinction I will attempt to make:

	<u>Policy</u>	<u>Vision</u>
Flow	Top-Down	Bottom-Up
Origination	Outside School	Collaboratively Grown
Sustainability	Subject to Politics	Cultural Norm

Figure 1

In some ways vision and policy compete with each other. Culture is an organic, inside-out set of beliefs, values, and norms generated through a local collaborative learning community of stakeholders. Policy, on the other hand, is “mass-produced”, outside-in set of beliefs, values, and norms that are created in a place other than the local school.

In improving school culture, it would make sense a local vision would be more sustainable and effective as Fullan (2005) notes. Teachers are more drawn to something that they’ve taken ownership in creating versus a set of regulations where there is no ownership in creating. But policy is part of modern schools especially with the high accountability movement.

Pragmatically, as a principal the task in improving school culture becomes finding a vision that can effectively achieve and enact policy in a manner that is shared by all stakeholders and will ultimately achieve the collaborative vision.

Collaboratively Developing a Vision

A vision can often be seen as a very vague and fuzzy concept (Jerald, 2006). But Thompson & McKelvy (2007) provide the succinct example of a vision's purpose as one "that would be the guidepost for all decisions they made about the school." This guidepost will provide a framework in which all decisions are made including procedures, student achievement, facilities, community relations, professional development, instruction, and curriculum. This vision becomes what effective schools know to be the "definition of the situation, sending a constant stream of unambiguous signals to students and teachers about what their roles and responsibilities are." (Jerald, 2006).

As principal creating a collaborative vision, all stakeholders need to be included in the process including teachers, parents/community members, and students. Anecdotally, students were noted to be a crucial piece to vision setting and implementing the vision. Parents also have a very important role in developing and maintaining the vision as it needs to be reinforced not only during school hours but after school hours. Teachers and school leaders round out the list of stakeholders vital to the vision creation process. Collectively, this vision should produce the pronoun "we" not "I" when describing how procedures and norms are carried out in the school.

The stakeholders' core set of beliefs and values need to be examined to construct the vision. Additionally, stakeholders need to think big and think long-term as far as 15 years down the road asking themselves, "where do I see my students or children then?" (Lummis, 2001). Once a consensus is formed, Dr. Ireson's (2007) advice is key regarding a vision statement's need to be short and succinct. Dr. Ireson recommends a vision statement be something as powerful and short as the Marine's long-lasting "Semper Paratus"

which reflects the military branch's values and beliefs. The vision can't keep anyone guessing nor keep anyone wondering what is expected of them. Once established it must be published and communicated at every step and turn until it becomes the norm.

Vision is also crucial in developing teacher, student, and parent leaders. These leaders can use the "norm" as a reference point when making decisions. These decisions are not necessarily large budget, policy, or staff issues. Rather, these decisions are the small ones that make up the very fabric of school culture. Examples include a student's decision to study for a test, markup the bathroom wall, or participate in class. As Dr. Randy Ireson (2007) notes, "stakeholders, when making decisions, shouldn't have to guess about the right answer."

Building a Collaborative Culture

An integral part of a vision to improve school culture is to build collaboration among the school stakeholders. This is especially important since "many schools exist as isolated workplaces where teachers work largely alone in their rooms, interacting little with their colleagues and keeping problems of practice to themselves." (Peterson, 2007). The culture of school where teachers work in isolation is greatly contrasted with the school where there is "faculty members working together, discussing important issues relevant to their roles as professionals, and taking a significant role in the school's decision making process" (Lummis, 2001). As a principal charged with improving school culture, a key to creating this bridge is ensuring collaboration is part of the vision to maximize student learning.

A collaborative culture as Peterson (2007) contends is not just a group of congenial, happy teachers as he cites Fullan and Hargreaves who remind us that

“contentment should not be mistaken for excellence”. Disagreement, risk-taking, and even failure are acceptable in a collaborative culture. In fact, in some cases they are encouraged as long as the focus is on improving student learning. The foundational trait to building a collaborative culture that facilitates this conversation is communication.

Improving school culture as a principal involves scheduling time and resources to allow these conversations to take place among school stakeholders. Teachers through grade-level planning and common planning times use the collaboratively created vision as their guide to discuss lessons, curriculum, and instructional approaches to improving student achievement. Since as Lummis (2001) observes that “established systems often stand in the way of such change”, leadership, modeling, and the willingness to be flexible will ensure collaboration can occur. A vital role for the principal.

Like any new process there is likely to be a cultural and organizational learning curve that needs to be overcome. Thompson and McKelvey (2007) note this from an observed, successful school, “Collaboration became the norm. It was not unusual for a teacher to ask colleagues, and even the principal, to observe a new lesson and to give feedback.” While it may take time and persistence, the results of student learning are well worth the effort.

Learning Communities/Team Learning

Based on a vision of success and collaboration, learning communities, sometimes called professional learning communities or team learning, are a cornerstone to improving school culture. Thompson and McKelvey (2007) echo this sentiment when they observe, “Team learning must be part of the common language used to develop the shared vision. It must become a procedure; it must become an expectation of the way we

are going to support a collaborative work culture. The principal must take leadership...”

Improving culture through learning communities can be enhanced through looking at critical pedagogy and critical feminism. In a discussion about blending critical feminism and critical pedagogy Ilan Gur’Ze’ev (2007) notes “Ellsworth suggests a feminist-oriented multiculturalism that demands/envisions the peaceful coexistence of different communities and identities which are committed to and constituted by different knowledge, criteria to judge knowledge, interests, and goals.” Despite critical pedagogy’s roots in student learning, the notion of community learning and knowledge apply to the teacher’s aspect of learning communities.

Another aspect of building learning communities that is essential is the capacity that it can build. Larry Sackney (2007) defines capacity in this way, “Capacity building involves developing individual and collective ability such that disposition, skills, knowledge, motivation and resources are available for future change and action. Where there is limited or no capacity, it is difficult to bring about any change.” As a principal, improving culture will be come sustainable, as Fullan (2005) notes, once capacity is built. Key to Sackney’s quote is the notion of change. With a clear, concise vision, collaborative culture and learning communities will help to build systemic capacity. Change itself with a strong vision and systems thinking in a competent system shouldn’t elicit the fear, resistance, and trepidation that typically follow.

Parents cannot be forgotten about being part of the learning community to improve culture. Families, as research suggests, can have a great impact on the learning of their children. An effective strategy to foster the learning community is to model, through parent-child learning and fun nights, how learning and discovery can occur. This

not only helps build capacity but also it includes parents in the very culture of the school. This I have come to learn doesn't stop at the school door – it can very well extend beyond door into the home through homework and parental involvement.

Student Learning & Accountability

Interestingly, sometimes discussions surrounding (as I have found through writing this research brief) improving school culture can get mired in many concepts, terms, and ideas. While none of these are inherently insufficient, taking a step back can present the overall goal of why school culture should be improved: student achievement. All of the areas that can contribute to improving school culture – vision, collaboration, professional learning, capacity, sustainability, and even the definition itself – should keep student achievement as its focus. Hessel and Holloway (2002) remind us of this in the context of the ISLLC standards when they write, “One of the hallmarks of successful school leadership is the leader’s ability to constantly focus on the fact that school operates for the benefit of the students and their families.”

How do we keep the focus on student learning while improving culture? And how do we focus on at-risk, low socioeconomic, and minority students while improving school culture? The answer is multi-pronged.

First, the vision of the school is essential for keeping this focus on student learning. A simple vision “learning and leading for all” not only keeps the focus on students but puts the vision in simple understandable terms for them. Communicated often enough, this vision can be the guide as discussed earlier that takes the abstraction of policy, curriculum, and instruction that makes it tangible and real.

Second, students need to be part of the improvement process. Students themselves need to take ownership over the vision of the school. Using the pronoun, “we” versus “I” and the phrase, “Around here, we do it this way” can be powerful statements of ownership that students feel. Students can feel ownership by having collaborative input on improving the school. Additionally, the learning communities shouldn’t be kept away from students. As Thompson and McKelvy (2007) suggest, “Tell students about the learning teachers accomplished during the summer and the learning experiences that the students should have in their classrooms.” Thompson and McKelvy (2007) go on to say “Students believe in their ability to learn because everyone is learning.” The beauty of this sentiment was that the above descriptions took place in an urban middle school.

Minority students, at-risk students, and low-socioeconomic students perhaps face larger challenges when it comes to improving school culture and seeing the results of their achievement, especially in the accountability-focused schools of today. The optimistic part is that school culture can be improved albeit with maybe some more hurdles.

First, it is important to point out as Jerald (2006) notes in urban schools, “building a strong culture is not an overnight task.” Jerald (2006) quotes Bryk and Schneider who point out, “relational trust is forged in daily social exchanges”. I think this is essential in urban schools since for many students daily social exchanges and trust may not be a common luxury in their home lives. This environmental culture can seep its way into the school culture. The school culture needs to find a way to overcome this overlap – trust, ownership, collaboration, and learning communities are all very viable ways. But there are others that allow such schools as the Key Academy in Washington, D.C. comprised

of a mostly low-income African American males to consistently earn some of the high achievement results in the city.

Jerald (2006) concludes this about Key Academy, “effective schools make sure that even the smallest aspects of daily life align with the core ideology and envisioned future. No symbol or ceremony is too minor to be coopted into serving the larger vision.” Jerald (2006) goes on to describe that the low-income fifth-graders will be asked to identify themselves as the Class of 2018. That is the year that teachers expect them to graduate from college. This core ideology (vision) of student learning and envisioned future are crucial aspects to improving culture in light of the obstacles low-income, minority students.

Conclusion

Improving school culture not only begins with vision but is sustained through vision. This vision is the “guidepost” that all stakeholders can refer to when making decisions at any level. The core of the vision should include student learning and achievement. Collaboration, learning communities, decision-making and the other artifacts that are discussed in the context of school culture should be aligned back to the vision of student learning. As Jerald (2006) quotes Collins and Porras, “Building a visionary company (school in this case) requires 1% vision and 99% alignment.” I truly believe that students no matter what risk status, race, or socioeconomic status could benefit this vision. Moreover, in a school with a collaboratively created, embraced vision students should not ask the question, “What am I here for?” (Jerald, 2006). They should be asking “Where do I want to go?”

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